

Cornville Historical Society

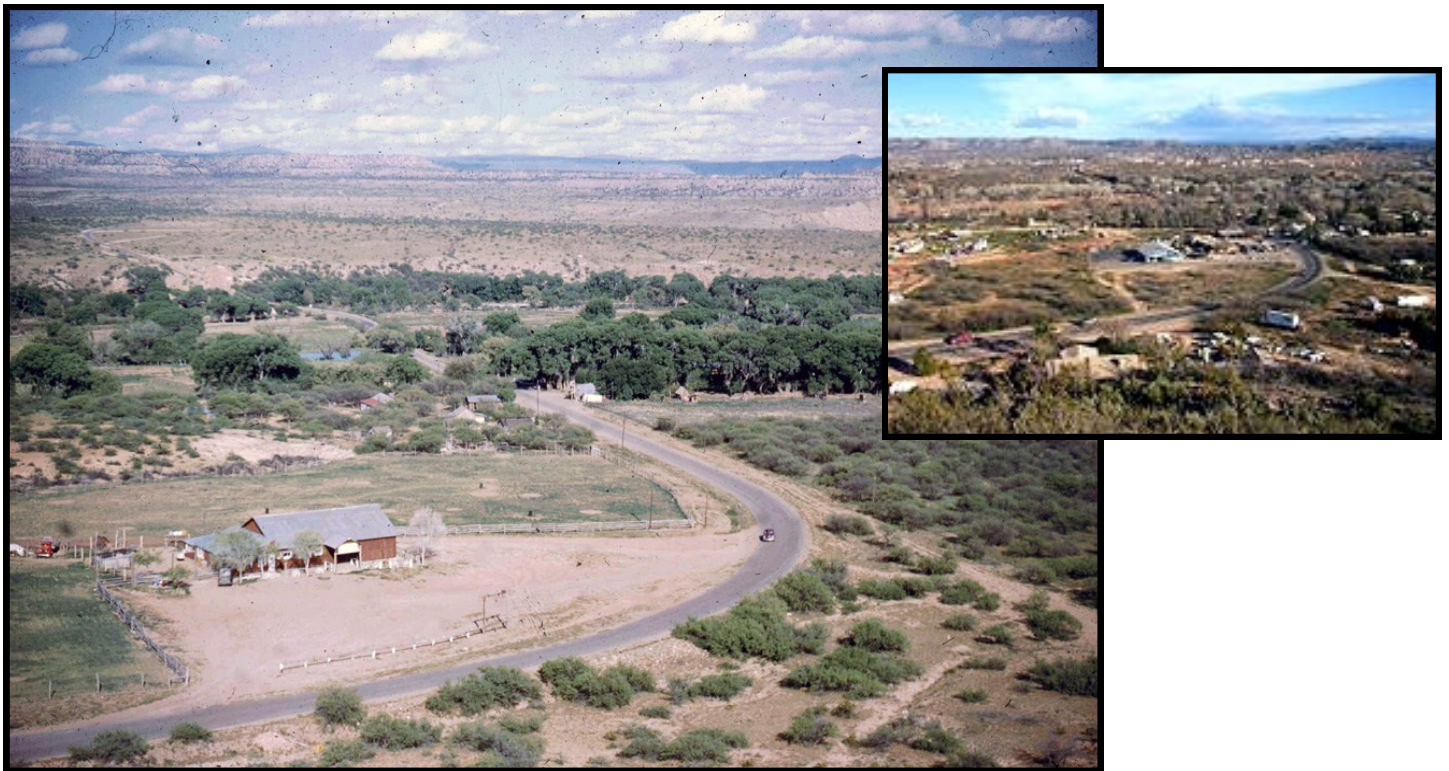
E-MAIL NEWS

P.O. Box 1200, Cornville, AZ 86325

CENTENNIAL COUNTDOWN EDITION

December 2011

The mission of the Cornville Historical Society is to gather, preserve and share information about the history of rural life within the Cornville postal area from 1860 to the present. This is the sixth in a series of "Centennial Countdown" articles leading to Arizona's 100th Birthday on February 14, 2012.



Cornville Road—showing Dance Hall in 1952; and (inset) Post Office (blue structure in center) in 2005. (Robert Loy Photos)

The Cornville Dance Hall

"We used to go there to watch the fights!" is the most common answer to any question about the Cornville Dance Hall, which was located at the bottom of the "Cornville Curves" right about where the Cornville Post Office is now, as shown in the above photos taken in 1952 and 2005. The Dance Hall was a local landmark of regional and state-wide fame for over forty years. By 1971, the dance hall became known as "The Way Station" before it burned to the ground in October of that year. Folks had a lot of fun there, too; and memories live on!

In the process of gathering oral histories about Cornville, several stories have come to light that provide a picture of the good old days when folks came from all over the Verde Valley and beyond to spend Saturday night in Cornville. The following accounts are quoted directly from files of the Cornville Historical Society.

We lived for Saturday Night

Margaret Chick Miller, daughter of Cornville homesteader Charles Chick and his wife Jessie (*who both served as Cornville Postmasters, consecutively for over 50 years*), remembers the early Thirties when she was a teenager, "There was a dance hall, a building we called the Oak Creek Dance Hall. I think that's what we called it; and somebody bought that little corner from my mother and they built this building and we had a live orchestra that would come every Saturday. We danced up there. I'm sure my mother sold that little corner where it was. ... where Cornville Road ... makes a turn. People would come out from Cottonwood, Clarkdale, Jerome and come and dance there. If I didn't have a date I walked from my house up, but my friend Evelyn Warlop ... Her father would bring her over to my house and she and I would walk up there together. The orchestra quit playing probably at midnight ... this would be Saturday." When asked how many would be there, Miller said "... not a 100 ... probably more like 50 ... I just know we lived for Saturday night. We had a live band ... I was in high school."



A Hellacious Good Time

When asked about the dance hall, **Harley Thompson**, son of Fern Stewart Thompson and grandson of Cornville homesteader David Wiley Stewart said, "Oh Yes! It [the dance hall] was run by Mom and Pop Adams. When I was going to high school, we used to go out there on Saturday nights just to see the fights. My dad was bootlegging whiskey about that time. We're talking about the Thirties, early Forties ... There were the miners from Jerome, the smelter workers and the cowboys from Camp Verde. They'd all come out. Eventually, after they'd drink a little bit ... they had some hellacious fights out there ... I remember when old Joe Hutchison was the deputy sheriff there in Cottonwood. Joe used to work those dances out there. He'd stand mostly by the door there and whenever he had a fight there, he'd usher them outside. 'All right you guys, get outside, get outside, take it out in the parking lot.' [He'd] just let them fight."



Bootlegging in the Parking Lot

Thompson continued, "Let me tell you about the bootlegging. On Friday night, my dad and I would get in my dad's old Model A Ford and we'd go down to what we called the head of Little Black Canyon, a suburb of Camp Verde, back up in the Mingus Foothills. There was an old man up there by the name of John Zemp; and John had a still up there. He made good bootleg whiskey. I mean it was good! I could drink a lot of it back in those days ... Dad would get a five-gallon tin. We'd take it home and we had a little cellar down under our house. Dad would take that down into the cellar and we'd fill it with a funnel into half-pints and pints, which the men could put in their coats, you know, and take it out to Cornville on Saturday night. That was my first policing job, to stay in the back of that old Model A Ford guarding dad's whiskey. Dad would bring a guy out and proceed to sell him a pint or half pint and I guarded the whiskey. Yeah, that was in the parking lot. They did most of their drinking outside, but, oh, we had some hellacious times there ... Oh, there were a lot of fights that happened in the Dance Hall." Thompson said, "Dad stopped bootlegging whiskey from old John Zemp ... when they changed the law ... and made whiskey legal again."

Mom Knocked Her Flat

Harley Thompson offered another dance hall story about his mother, Fern Stewart Thompson. He said, "I remember one time when I was in high school, we went to a place there in Cottonwood called Mike's Dog House and Mrs. Bonnie Michael ran it. Her son Thomas and I were good friends. We went there one night, a bunch of us, to get a hot dog or a hamburger or something and one of the kids came up to me and said, 'Did you hear about your mother fighting out at Cornville?' I said, 'No, tell me about it.' He said, 'Oh man, she just knocked the hell out of a woman out there.' So, I found out what happened later. My mother was dancing with this man and the woman who was with him became jealous of his attentions to my mother, so she was going to claw my mother down the face. Well, my mother was a horsewoman and she could work cows and rope and do things just like a man, although she was a perfect lady, very feminine. But when this old lady made a clawing at her, my mother patted her in the jaw and just knocked her flat. When she got up, mom put her down again. Every time she'd get up, my mother would hit her and knock her down until finally she knocked her out. And that was the end of that. The husband or boyfriend, or whatever the hell he was, hauled this old gal out of there and they took off. And that's a fact, my mother was there. That was IN the dance hall, not out in the parking lot."

Wayne Newton ... in the Middle of Nowhere

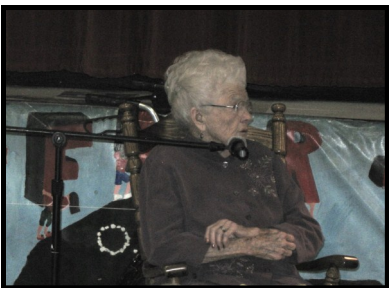
William “Chili Bill” Brooks, former Cornville resident who served as a pilot for John Wayne, hosted a television cooking show, and was a friend of movie stars, shared his experiences about the Cornville Dance Hall. “...We all just went because the girls would come down with daddy out of the hills and they hadn’t seen any boys in a week or two. So, about twelve o’clock at night up would come a beer bottle in the middle of the dance floor. Now you gotta remember in those days, you only danced counter clockwise like this and the beer bottle would splatter and somebody would take a punch at somebody and pretty soon it would look like a John Wayne movie ... but that didn’t happen until everybody had had lots of that beer ...

“There was another famous guy in Phoenix. In those days, television was just starting ... Most people were still listening to radios. There was a very good little team down there [at the Dance Hall] and they had one of the first television shows in Phoenix. And these two young boys ... one was a fat little guy and they both played guitars. But the fat little guy that was playing at the Cornville Dance Hall was Wayne Newton! [Later, when] I flew him also, Wayne Newton said that one of his very first gigs (whatever a gig is) was in Cornville, with the radio and television station, who came up [to Cornville] in the middle of nowhere. You gotta understand there was nothing here! Cornville Market wasn’t there ... Casey’s Corner might have been a bar or something at that time.” Others have reported the Wayne Newton gig was in 1956 or 57.



‘You Stay Inside During Intermission!’

Betty Dickinson Kent, granddaughter of Cornville’s second postmaster Sammy Dickinson, said “My mother told me, ‘You can go to the Cornville Dance Hall’... this was when I was a teenager ... ‘but you stay inside during intermission!’ So we stayed inside and had fun while the guys went outside and fought. [Later] I worked there. I made hamburgers and hot dogs and sold coffee and cokes. They had a wall and the bar was on this side and my short order place was over here.”



Counting Ballots in the Dance Hall

Margaret Derrick said, “I used to dance at the dance hall. Once a week they had dances there and it was fun. You know, I don’t remember exactly, but someone started selling hamburgers and stuff like that. And they would have a good crowd there.” Margaret added, “Can I say something else about the dance hall? Priscilla Loy quit being on the election board; and I took her place. We stayed up all night, counting ballots in the dance hall ... that was a long night. It was at that time the polling place, a long time ago. “

Instigators Came From All Around

Don Godard, long-time Cornville resident, said, “In 1959, I was bouncer at the dance hall and my wife cooked hamburgers. One night they had an instigator from Camp Verde and his crew and an instigator from Flagstaff and his crew and an instigator from Cottonwood and his crew; and we kept separating them all night long, getting them quieted down. Just about quarter to one, one guy from Flagstaff started out of the bar with a case of beer on his shoulder and he shoved a boy he shouldn’t have shoved. He knocked him clear out to the middle of the floor. Beer scattered everywhere. Within seconds, everybody in that place was fighting. I was out there throwing off this one and throwing off that one and the Camp Verde guy was under every one of them I threw I think. Pretty quick, somebody grabbed me around the neck and I hauled off and kicked backwards and I kicked the bartender. He was a one-legged guy. He picked up his wooden leg from the floor. He got back to the bar and came out with a ... and he said let those son of a guns out ... They all went outside. By the time the real law got there they were pretty well all cleared out.”

Gutted by Fire

On October 28, 1971, the Cottonwood *Independent* newspaper reported:

“The Way Station in Cornville, a popular Verde Valley gathering place for many years, was swept by fire last Friday morning ... The fire apparently started around 10 a.m. in the ceiling above the wood stove located in the restaurant ... Spectators reported that it was some 20 to 30 minutes before any fire equipment arrived at the scene ... When the fire equipment arrived, they made the decision that nothing could be done to save the Way Station from the engulfing flames ...”

Totally destroyed, the damage to the Way Station, owned by Mel Martin and Charles Oney of Phoenix was estimated by Hughes at some \$50,000. The only items salvaged from the gutted building were a few household items and band equipment owned by Bill Hopkins, an entertainer from Cottonwood.



Only a few personal belongings could be removed from the Way Station in Cornville before it was totally destroyed by a Friday morning fire. The fire is believed to have started in the ceiling above a newly installed wood burning stove and rapidly spread through beams in the roof. The wooden building, a popular gathering place for some 40 years, was operated by Quentin Hughes and his wife since the middle of August. —*Independent Photo & Caption*, October 28, 1971

We'd like to hear your story ... and find photos, too!

Write down your memories and send us photos! Let us know people we might contact for information. The Cornville Historical Society is gathering all the information it can find about the famous Cornville Dance Hall. Contact the Cornville Historical Society, PO Box 1200, Cornville, AZ 86325; or *E-Mail News Editor* at 928-649-1916 or jdymlr@cableone.net.